

a population boom.  
**Matthew Moore and  
Jessica Irvine report.**

**S**ydney already is Australia's most densely populated city. Planners, developers and governments all agree, however, it must get a whole lot denser.

Childbirth and record immigration levels will boost Sydney by 40 per cent by 2036, taking the population to nearly 6 million. No one disputes these numbers but few suburbs volunteer to take their share.

As the community argues, the housing shortage gets steadily worse and prices climb.

With clear signs of frustration, the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, waded into a new Commonwealth interest this week, striking a deal with the states that requires they produce plans by 2012 on how to improve their cities.

Federal approval of the plans will be a precondition for funding for projects the states cannot afford.

"If we are going to invest in transport infrastructure, we want to make sure that the planning framework which has been applied to those decisions is robust and consistent," Rudd said after the Council of Australian Governments met in Brisbane.

Decades of dithering have finally caught up with the harbour city. Increasing urban density in Sydney is all but guaranteed. The plans Rudd approves will shape where and how Sydneysiders live, eat, work and play.

He will need to be quick: Sydney society already is changing a lot faster than city plans. People are living longer and increasingly living alone.

Even if Sydney's population was frozen at today's level, it would need an extra 65,000 homes just to accommodate new, smaller households largely made up of singles, the elderly and divorcees.

On top of that, people want bigger and bigger houses, with few and fewer in each of them.

Australian homes are now the biggest in the world, overtaking even the super-sized American barns, according to CommSec analysis of official figures.

The average new freestanding house in NSW is now 263 square metres, bigger than a tennis court. If apartments are included, the figure drops substantially to 205 square metres, still ahead of the rest of the world.

Richard Cardew, a retired expert in population density, says this is roughly triple the space per person Sydneysiders had in the 1950s. Few believe this trend is sustainable.

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AUSTRALIANS need to radically rethink the way they view housing, advises Dr Debbie Faulkner, a housing researcher at South Australia's Flinders University.

"Housing used to be just something you lived, whereas housing now has become a lifestyle issue and in some cases a status issue. We all want the double-garage and family room and everything else. Our expectations

and aspirations have changed as our wealth has increased.

"The role of housing in people's lives has changed. It's not just a place you live, it is a place that provides you with identity. It's part of who you are."

The Sydney architect Adam Haddow agrees people are obsessed with their individual houses rather than their communities. "I think there has to be an attitude change if we're going to deal with any of this. The community needs to be much more interested in the 'us' rather than the 'me'."

Haddow says many young people shun big houses for more contained living near the city centre. "Younger people are much more interested in not owning a car and walking to work. I think they get some of those sustainability issues a bit more."

That lifestyle works in upmarket inner-city suburbs like Paddington and Bondi Junction, with their housing ranging from cute terraces to a

mix of old and new, low- and high-rise apartments. Waverley municipality, which takes in Bondi Junction, has the highest residential density in Australia. Haddow says the challenge now is to replicate something similar in the middle "doughnut suburbs" further out, in places like Ku-ring-gai.

"Most of the people that live there would say that they would support sus-

of the Save Our Suburbs of half a dozen SOS groups sprung up in the past moves by government to build apartments in existing suburbs.

Ku-ring-gai is the ample of what happened plans are foisted and articulate popula

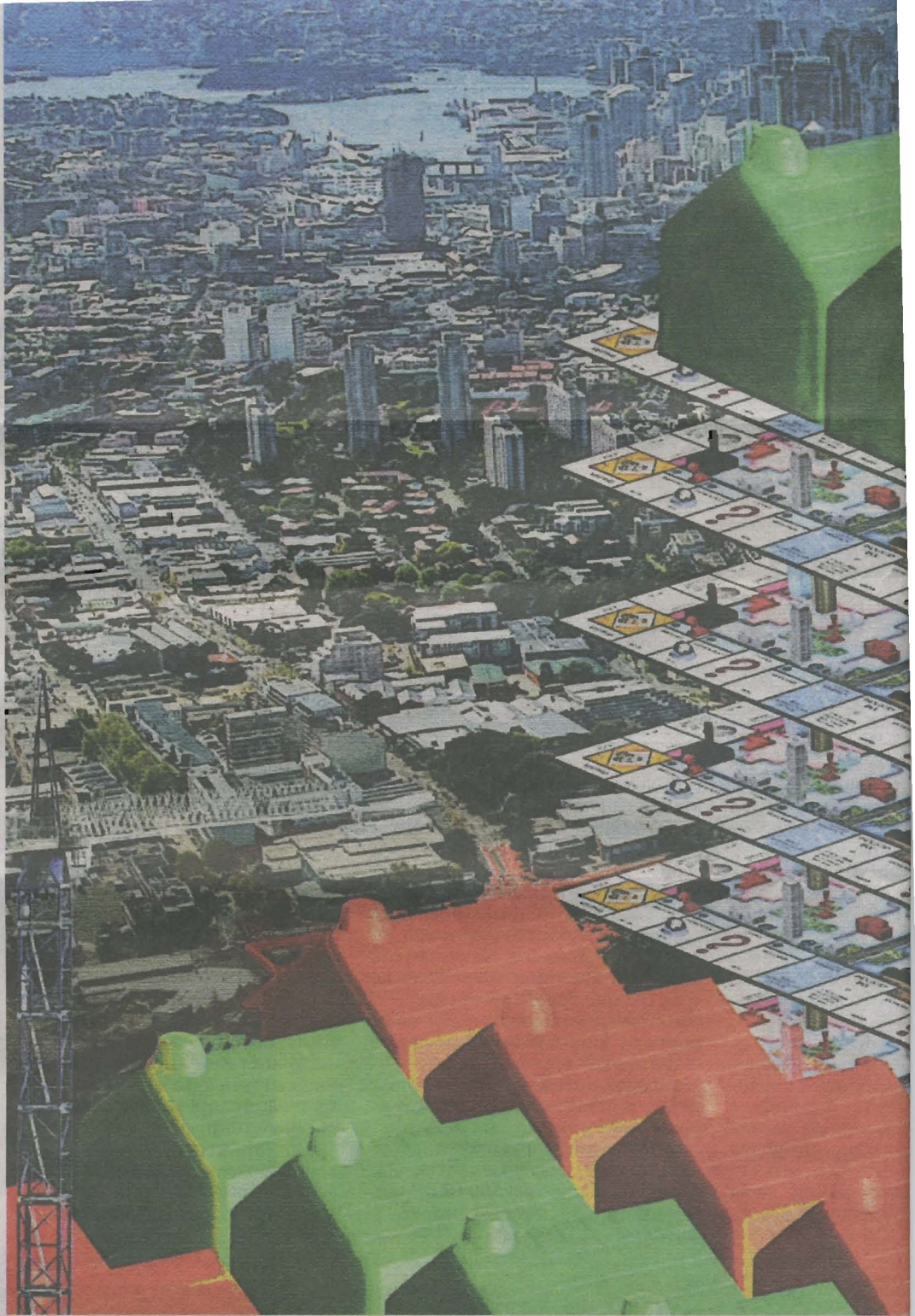
**'It's a bit silly to have the biggest houses in the world with more density.'** Craig Allchin, architect

tainability and support projects which have high environmental credentials but, by saying no to anything in their suburb, they essentially cause an environmental catastrophe to occur in the outer suburbs."

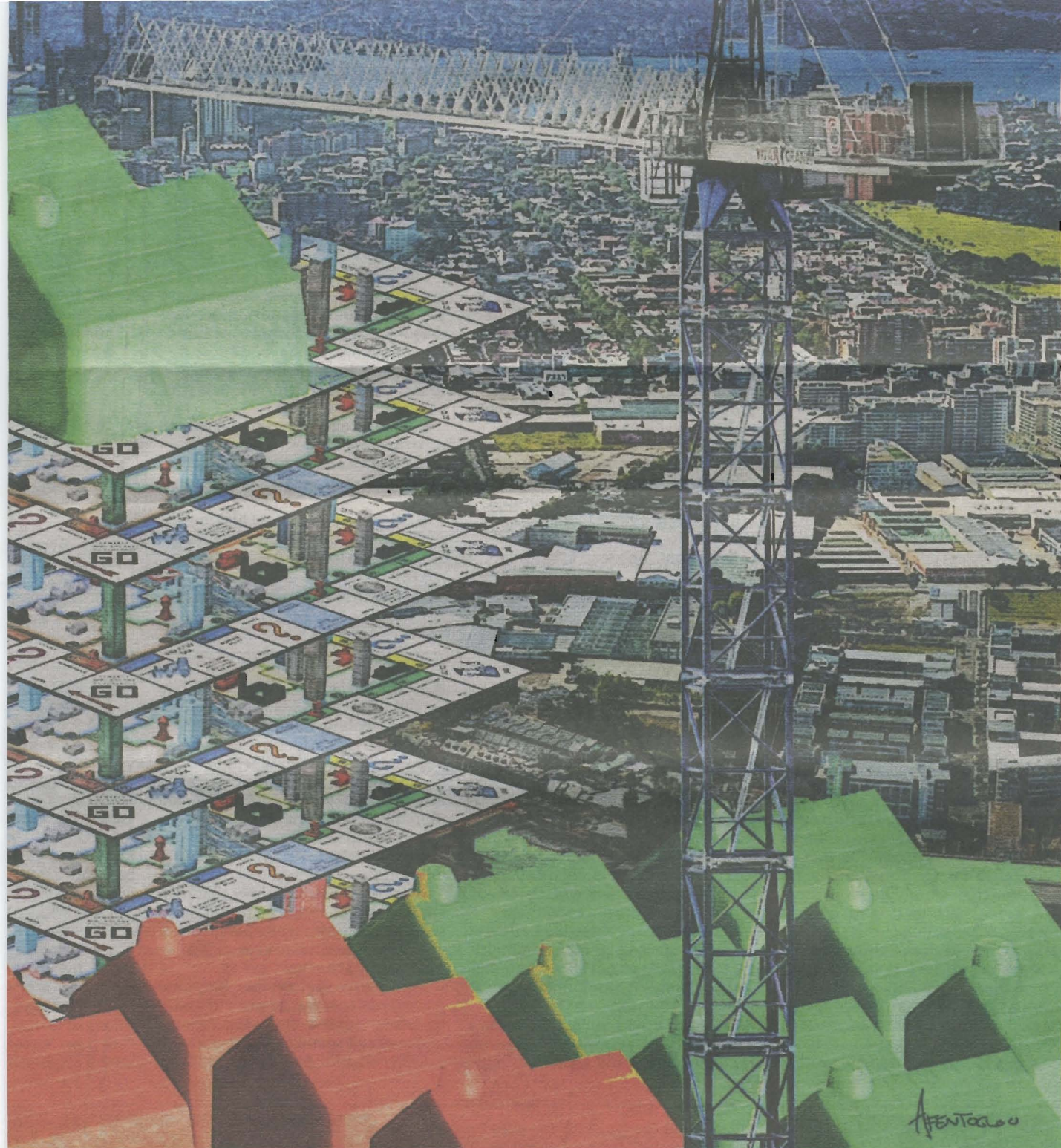
Try telling that to Dr Tony Recsei, from Ku-ring-gai. He is the president

The state Labor Government's decision to rezone land in the inner city to allow for thousands of apartments, replacing heritage houses with high-rise flats, infuriated locals who fought to save their community.

Recsei says it is







bs (NSW) – one groups that have decade to fight and developers and high-rise in best-known ex- is when govern- on an unwilling e.

development on Sydney's fringe or in other parts of the state.

"We suggest Sydney should be expanded in greenfield areas, the Government should set up satellite cities and rejuvenate declining regions, like Bathurst, Orange and Dubbo. This would require a certain amount of courage and initiative and government infrastructure such as income

city, the longer it takes to get to work. Tokyo takes over 50 minutes to get to work; in Sydney it's 35 minutes."

Talking to planning professionals like the architect Craig Allchin elicits the feeling Recsei is fighting a losing battle.

Allchin has been heavily involved in the NSW Government's five-year-old metropolitan plan for Sydney's future, which is about to be updated.

After working on Melbourne's acclaimed revitalisation plan, which began in the late 1990s, he lived in China for several years. He believes Asia, not Europe, has the answers for Sydney.

Allchin has no qualms about high-rise apartment blocks, provided they are in the right locations on transport links in metropolitan centres, such as Parramatta and Chatswood.

He nominates the 77-floor World Square tower on George Street as a building that works. He says its three

levels of shops and restaurants provide a much better use of space than the landscaped courtyards developers were often forced to provide in exchange for permission to build high.

"I'm looking at [parts of] Chatswood and looking to Asian cities on how to do the densities ... World Square is a better solution than a tower on an open bit of grass which ends up being windswept, with a few people having a fag."

Buildings the size of World Square must be part of a mix, he says; so must rows of terraces and six or eight houses on single blocks – houses smaller than today's norm.

"It's a bit silly to have the biggest houses in the world. Sydney will be better with more density; we'll be a bit more connected to our community; having stronger local centres will be much better."

Rod Simpson is the architect who  
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the world. Sydney will be better

vernment's deci- the garden sub- construction of nts, often repla- has infuriated ve the character better to have

tax concessions for entrepreneurs to put their businesses outside of Sydney. It can be done."

Most arguments in favour of urban consolidation are nonsense, Recsei says, especially the assertion that increased population density leads to improved transport. "The denser the



# The big squeeze

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developed Sydney's green Olympic village concept. He believes Sydney's demand for housing can be met in ways far more environmentally responsible than simply building more and more apartments and houses, however tall or small.

His plan is to divide thousands of McMansions so owners can rent part of their house.

He has just reviewed plans of 30 typical houses and published an article in the architecture magazine *Take 7*, setting out design principles that

would allow single- and double-storey houses to be converted into two or three separate dwellings.

McMansions typically provide four bedrooms and four living spaces as well as the laundry, kitchen and bathroom – plenty of room when as few as two or three people occupy them.

But subdividing these big houses is difficult because planning and building regulations do not allow a number of households within one physical structure, Simpson says.

Parents' retreats, media rooms and teenagers' recreation rooms are seen as enhancements but additional laun-

dries and kitchens are not. Yet, they are essential if several households are to live happily under one roof.

While the work in converting houses is relatively simple, planning laws are anything but. "You whack in a few doors; you already have the plumbing," Simpson says. "The problem is the planning system does not allow us to adapt and have two households in one dwelling."

It is not just planning laws that keep empty nesters rattling around oversized McMansions while parents with young children are kept stuck in cramped apartments.

A big revenue source for state governments is the stamp duty paid by home buyers. It makes moving house very expensive. Simpson says people should be encouraged to

move to fitting accommodation, not to be caught in housing that suited prior circumstances. Half of all Australians moved home in the past five years; a decade earlier, it was three out of four.

The national tax review headed by the Treasury chief, Dr Ken Henry – his report is due out early next year – has this most inefficient tax in its sights, but the states would need to be compensated.

Meanwhile, the housing shortage gets worse by the month. Sydney house prices have increased relentlessly by an average 1 per cent a month this year, recouping all the losses, and then some, from the global financial crisis.

Renters also feel the pinch. Rents are up 20 per cent in outer suburbs in

two years and by 30 per cent in middle-ring areas.

Frank Gelber, the chief economist at the forecaster BIS Shrapnel, says Sydney has nearly a two-year backlog in housing needs. New housing has not met demand for five years. Thirty thousand homes a year need to be built yet just 15,500 were built last financial year, and 14,000 are expected this financial year. "It's ludicrous," Gelber says.

He says the credit squeeze compounded long-standing weaknesses in the market. Sydney's property bubble burst in 2003, well before other cities', sending prices down. Developers complain that state infrastructure charges and levies make building too expensive.

Gelber's solution is for the State Government to rezone commercial

land in the inner- and middle-city areas such as Rydalmere and Silverwater.

In recent years four out of five new homes are built in established suburbs. Most were apartments, prompting the City Futures Research Centre at the University of NSW to find out who was living in them and how these residents felt about it.

Nearly 40 per cent of apartment dwellers were low-income families with children, mostly in outer suburbs.

A quarter were the so-called "economically engaged" – young adults, singles and couples on high incomes. An older group of couples aged over 50 and without children – the "apartment elite" – made up a further quarter and lived mostly in the inner city.

Older people lived in apartments

by choice; many younger people said they would prefer a house. Overall, however, three-quarters of apartment dwellers said it suited their lifestyle. Many welcomed not having to weed the garden.

Sydney's future is apartments. The NSW branch of the Property Council of Australia says Sydney will cope with 1.7 million more people only if houses and old apartments are demolished on a large scale and replaced with medium- and high-rise apartment blocks near transport routes. Old industrial sites such as Pyrmont and Green Square are running out of space for new apartments.

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# The big squeeze